

The Intelligence of the Hand

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Ex-philosopher Matthew Crawford celebrates the virtues of manual labor, lamenting the alienation that he argues is inherent in ostensibly intellectual occupations. Crawford is convinced that only manual work is truly intelligent, and he challenges current educational policies while arguing for a rediscovery of the value of hands-on activity.

Reviewed: Matthew B. Crawford, *Éloge du carburateur. Essai sur le sens et la valeur du travail*. Paris, La Découverte, 2010 [*Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into The Value of Work*, The Penguin Press, 2009]. French translation by Marc Saint-Upéry. 250 p., 19 €.

Given the way labor is currently distributed in society, it is unusual for anybody to hold both so-called intellectual and manual professions in a single lifetime. But Matthew Crawford has achieved just such a career change, and the lessons that he derives from the experience are deeply inspiring. Born in 1965, this American philosopher-mechanic majored in physics in the late 1980's before colliding with a dead-end job market. After a series of odd jobs, he decided to pursue graduate studies in philosophy, eventually completing a doctorate. He then made a living from his pen and ideas until a stint in a Washington think-tank showed him a darker side of intellectual work, revealing it as routine, heteronomous, and ultimately uncreative. He also felt manipulated at times as he wrote one research review after another that toed his employer's official line. Boredom gnawed at him, and he began tinkering with motorcycles in his apartment-building's basement before finally deciding to open his own garage in 2004. *Shop Class as Soulcraft* grew out of this occupational leap, and it is a joyful, stirring book that portrays the author's discovery of the pleasures of artisanal manual labor, which he contends are in stark contrast to the phoney flattery involved in intellectual labor¹.

¹ Richard Sennet *The Craftsman*, Yale University Press (2008) tackles the same subject.

The stakes for our societies, which tend to embrace the seductive notion of “knowledge-based economies”, are quite high. Thanks to our intelligence, we are freed from difficult, ungratifying labor that takes brawn instead of brain, which allows us to enjoy the comfort afforded by this liberating distance from nature and raw material while reassuring ourselves of our presumed “comparative advantage” over poorer nations stuck serving as the world’s factories. More *motto* and ideology than actual reality, this efficiency-based division of labor smacks of the credos of classical economics, and it also supplies the rationale for the OECD’s (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) policies for development and for higher education. Indeed, the agency, in a nice little bit of circular reasoning, often cites the prolongation of schooling as tangible evidence of so-called knowledge-based economies. In the past decade, the nations that allegedly provide unskilled labor have amply demonstrated that they are not quite as dumb as this binary division implies, but still, the idea that the key to individual salvation is the accumulation of abstract knowledge and ever-higher diplomas has become widespread. And it is an idea that arises from an ancestral contempt, particularly in the West, for what we call the manual trades. (It is worth noting that vocational training programs in France are restricted in effect to academically-challenged students, who are typically forced into vocational schools by default and become convinced that they have gotten what they deserved).

Crawford’s intention is to rattle prejudices like these, which are so deeply ingrained in our schools and among our elites. He accomplishes this by challenging the great divide between manual labor and intellectual work that is perceived as the guarantee of progress. Using specific examples from motorcycle repair to demonstrate that all manual labor requires intelligence, he simultaneously shows how many so-called intellectual activities do not require very much of it. Assuming the stance of a philosopher, he critically appraises the latent argument that doing and thinking can be separated, along with its corollary that the manipulation of abstractions is the same thing as thought. True, the underlying assumption of progress is that it offers to liberate us from physical burdens so that we can achieve our real ambitions while continuing to become ever-increasingly free-er. But are things really all that clear-cut? Crawford pokes fun at the conventional discourse surrounding the newly emergent “creative class,” whose members supposedly enjoy the privilege of both work and freedom while maximizing their potential and contributing to economic growth. Are all of these laborers in engineering, design, advertising, and artistic fields always really as free and

creative and on the cutting edge of modernity as they like to think they are? Or might it not be all just talk? And, while we're at it, are all those white-collar jobs in the big corporations – if not exactly manual occupations – really so high-brow? It is true that they “save” us from what are supposedly the nastiest tasks, the ones with too high an “opportunity cost” for the educated. After all, isn't it a waste of time for somebody college-educated who can earn so much to repair everything that's broken at home? Crawford deconstructs this reasoning, which seems so sensible at first glance, by underscoring the insidious effects of an economic imperialism that reduces all human activity to an abstract quantity of time and money, as though our activities were completely interchangeable. Sure, even with a college degree, you might prefer to “waste your time” repairing your own bicycle, or perhaps cooking a dish, but it might well be better if you just let your neighborhood caterer fix it.

In addition to the fact that we know nothing about the specific pleasures associated with particular tasks, the modern obsession with being freed from manual activity engenders further constraints. “Material” things become shrouded in mystery since we no longer deal with them, and as a consequence, we become dependent on people who seem to know what they're talking about and who write totally abstruse service manuals. Crawford, a mechanic himself, provides ironic examples of the authors of how-to documents who lack even the slightest concrete experience, and whose knowledge of their subject is totally decontextualized and non-situated. These technical writers just line up abstract bits of reasoning, and the results turn out to be useless in the event of a true mechanical breakdown. Solving an actual mechanical problem – Crawford's new trade – means getting your hands greasy and trying – concretely – to comprehend. He convincingly shows the high levels of wisdom and intelligence that are needed just to “penetrate the mental fog created by the introduction of these layers of abstract and disjointed work”. In the process, Crawford takes a few shots at the computational theory of the mind, which is currently a matter of some debate in cognitive psychology, according to which we are “some kind of computer”. To argue against this theory, Crawford draws on his own experience and on research into situated cognition (like that used by fire crews in the heat of action), strengthening the conviction that the experts on the ground always win out over the algorithms.

As for so-called intellectual jobs, abstraction is king. The tasks and the criteria used to evaluate them, not to mention each individual's responsibilities, are a whole lot fuzzier than in the trades. Vagueness prevails, and “human resources” and “personal development” have to

occasionally be brought in: “where no appeal to a carpenter’s level is possible, sensitivity training becomes necessary” (p. 157)! Careers, especially for managers, thus hinge principally on the image that they are able to project, which leads to a sensation of permanent psychological insecurity and the fear that everything might just fall apart. Employees are no better off than managers, because their work is housed within organizations whose meaning and boundaries are invisible to them. Consequently, it is hard for them to evaluate their own personal contribution and therefore to ever really feel competent. Crawford appropriates the term alienation to describe an abstract activity that is fundamentally heteronomous and whose sole justification is therefore extrinsic: the paycheck. He reminds us along the way that psychology has demonstrated how inefficient work or activity that is only rewarded externally can be.

Using Aristotle’s model of human activity as a reference point, Crawford opposes extrinsically-motivated activity to activity that derives its own justification and completeness from the pleasure of performing it, as well as the positive judgments that it elicits from others. The Other’s recognition is essential to meaningful work, as are other conditions, such as the “pride of accomplishment in the performance of whole tasks that can be held in the mind all at once, and contemplated as whole once finished” (p. 156). Crawford describes with some pride and humor the satisfied wink of a client who takes off on his repaired motorcycle – and whom he felt comfortable billing for the real cost of his labor! But work is also social because it is through exchange that the craftsman’s knowledge and professional norms are developed: “the social character of his work isn’t separate from its internal or ‘engineering’ standards (...) It may even be that what those standards *are*, what perfection consists of, is something that only comes to light through these iterated exchanges with others who use the product, as well as other craftsmen in the same trade” (p. 187). Incidentally, it is worth noting that these insights shed light on the chronic malaise in certain intellectual professions in which there is neither a finished product nor exchange with peers...

Crawford approaches the question of educational policy in a way that is consistent with his vision of the manual versus the intellectual occupations. Along with other scholars before him, he criticizes the irrelevance of the knowledge imparted by schools to the world of work and echoes a concern, expressed by the economist Joseph Schumpeter in 1942, that prolonging schooling might make young people unemployable in the manual trades without necessarily qualifying for truly intellectual professions. Again addressing themes dealt with

by other scholars², Crawford points to the perverse effects of this flight towards the “top” in an effort to escape manual jobs, arguing that it arises from a utilitarian conception of education, an obsession with rank and “selective symbolic distinctions”, and even “intellectual disengagement” (p. 168). During their university education, “college habituates young people accustomed to accept as the normal course of things a mismatch between form and content, official representations and reality” (p. 147). In short, we learn to believe the abstract service manuals without ever feeling the need to go find things out for ourselves. Crawford also decries a trend in teaching (perhaps more relevant in the United States than in France) that involves endless efforts to reinforce students’ self-esteem by evaluating them only on easy tasks according to vaguely-defined, abstract criteria. Students’ sense of self-worth thus derives only from their diplomas and degrees, and they are never forced to face anything concretely real. Crawford fears that this system fails to help students to become independent-minded and assertive, and that in any event it creates the impression that you can always get out of a situation by using rhetoric. He adds, somewhat maliciously, that “those who belong to a certain order of society – people who make big decisions that affect all of us – don’t seem to have much sense of their own fallibility” (p. 203), continuing to allude to Wall Street traders’ sense of infallibility and the contrast of this self-perception with the artisan-repairman’s intimate awareness that things can *always* go wrong...

In sum, this book pursues a number of lines of thought, and it would certainly be possible to find flaws in them. There are no historical or sociological analyses of how work has evolved³, and it is a shame that the author does not spend more time discussing the notion of work from a philosophical perspective. But because this reviewer is not competent in this area, I will limit myself to noting that this rich and witty book nevertheless leaves me wishing for more ideas about how to make work more meaningful. Many economists and sociologists have said it, but it bears repeating that we have an obligation to protest the “sunny presumption of meritocracy” (p. 145) that is so common among economists of human capital and to refuse to accept it as inevitable that the rich nations’ future will entail “delocalizing” so-called non-qualified jobs. But we need to go still further in our efforts to derive lessons from these insights for educational and labor policies. We will never return to manual jobs for

² Here, I take the liberty of citing my own work, which synthesizes these perspectives: *L’inflation scolaire* (Seuil, La République des idées, 2006).

³ A number of Matthew B. Crawford’s intuitions have been formally discussed in previous French work on the sociology of labor. See, for example, D. Méda, *Travail : la révolution nécessaire*, Ed. de l’Aube, 2010) or F. DUBET, *Le déclin de l’institution*, 2002 and *Injustices*, Seuil, 2006).

everybody, but it is true that, contrary to what we so readily believed, the so-called intellectual trades are not the most difficult jobs to delocalize – all of the physics research in the world could easily be conducted in a non-Western country. Local jobs, whether currently considered skilled or unskilled, are. This is the case, for example, of community jobs in the health professions and in personal services, categories whose workers are currently so ill-considered, both in terms of work conditions and salaries, revealing the value that society attributes to such tasks. Given present circumstances, there are obviously good reasons to flee some of these job categories, and we cannot sing their praises without stopping to ask ourselves what conditions would be required for them to be really attractive beyond the intrinsic pleasure of their activity that Crawford is trying so hard to convince us of! Although admittedly the basic pleasure in them is completely ignored, given the load of contempt that is so regularly heaped on such jobs.

It is therefore urgent to collectively revalue all of these non-delocalizable jobs and to attack the logic of prestige that so influences young people's choice of vocational orientation. We also need to ask ourselves how we can prepare young people for such jobs, considering whether more abstract knowledge is needed, or perhaps more personal qualifications. Ultimately, the manual/intellectual distinction itself deserves to be deconstructed, because a number of so-called intellectual trades are also obviously manual (take dentistry, for example), while it is equally true that there are no manual trades that do not require intellect. This is the *leitmotif* of this fine elegy of the carburetor, which will make intellectuals who read it regret that they don't know how to fix their own motorcycles...

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